

Re: Robert and PP

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{Dec. 12, 1988. The fragment that follows is a true example of recent work-in-progress. It starts with an admonition to myself--which is violated almost immediately--to stick to a simple, single anecdote. As usual, other memories, other thoughts intrude: jumbled in time, in a disorder that has its own meaning, not too hard to discover.

For a chronological narrative, this first draft could rather easily be cut up and the pieces transposed into a proper time sequence. Or edited in other ways. But for purposes of this submission, this piece has its own interest, exposing what this process really is that I have embarked on, and why it is turning out to be--as I expected--exciting and creative for me.

[I come back to this passage after a brief break, during which I talked on the phone with my son Robert, and find myself tempted to throw out the above several paragraphs as being neither here nor there. But a phrase that Robert said once has just come back to me, that suggests that perhaps these anecdotes are part of the story, after all. I'll stay in brackets and see where this goes; it violates the rule I just laid down for story-telling, but it does illustrate the earlier plaint.

After two years at Harvard, Robert was about to take an extended leave of absence. This was after my trial, and he had been considerably influenced by all that. Also by, in effect, Janaki's reading list I had passed on to him, and by people he had met during that period, including Daniel Berrigan, for whom he later became private secretary.

As a matter of fact, at Harvard he once competed for, and I believe won, an obscure prize with a small award for the best undergraduate book collection; his collection was books by and concerning Thomas Merton. Much later, on a visit to Gethsemane, Merton's Trappist monastery in Kentucky--where, as he put it in a letter, he "fell in love"--Robert decided to become a Catholic. (There is a theme emerging here in my thoughts: the--delayed, contingent--relation of reading to life change. The examples more familiar to me, to come, are King and myself. Who else?)

Robert was leaving Harvard in a rather jaundiced mood; the sense he had of it was a haven of rich kids unconcerned about the world. But what had finally tore it for him was a course on ethical decision-making that he audited regularly, which addressed in large part the ethical challenges confronted by German citizens in the Hitler period.

To his astonishment--not so much mine, by this time--the instructor's point of view, which met with little resistance from the other students, conveyed tolerant, sophisticated understanding and approval of the choices most Germans made to go along with the way things were, i.e., the way they had recently come to be. The lesson of conformity--why it was all right to get along by going along with anything--which Robert found implicitly wherever he turned at Harvard, for once was blatant, for all its trappings of complexity and compassion (for the collaborators).

In explaining to me over the phone why he felt a need to get away, Robert summed up the message he found his instructors at Harvard mainly conveyed, not so much by what they said as by the evident lack of any sense of urgent relation between what they were discussing and what they felt called on to do about it in action, or to call others to consider.

"The message is," he said, "'You can study anything you want here, just so long as you don't let it affect your life. You can study Marx, if you like [that was a change since I was there], so long as you don't try to act on it. You can even study Gandhi, so long as you aren't changed by it.'"

The last is not so easy, even for a Harvard man, as Robert and I found, though no doubt possible; at least there are risks. To that extent Fulbright was right, and Harry was wrong: or vice versa, depending on whether or not one wanted to risk fundamental change in the Department of Defense, or Rand, as an inadvertent consequence of research.

The reading by itself doesn't do it, of course; that is one of the points of the story being told here. But it has dangers, it creates certain readiesses and weakens others; and if one then meets certain people, the trap may be sprung: a career for which Harvard has otherwise qualified you is swept away.

The people Robert had in mind meeting at that point in his life are further ties to this narrative. He had applied for a visa to India, intending to study what remained there of the Gandhian movement. One person he expected to work with was J.P. Narayan, who had been a main speaker on the first night of the Princeton conference in 1968; another was Narayan Desai, a leader of the sarvodaya land-grant movement, whom I met at the WRI conference I am about to describe.

Both were close friends of Janaki, who had been active for years in the Fifties in the sarvodaya movement started by Vinoba Bhawe. While Robert was waiting for his visa--he had made his purposes and intended contacts clear at the Consulate, and his visa was unaccountably delayed for months--both Narayan and Desai were suddenly imprisoned, along with most of the others on Robert's list--when Indira Gandhi imposed the Emergency (mainly because "J.P." was on the verge of displacing her in an election).

Robert stopped waiting for his visa to come through, and instead entered a life of voluntary poverty at the Catholic Worker community in New York. He spent several years there (he became a Catholic some years later), two and a half as editor of The Catholic Worker, the national, penny-a-copy anarchist-pacifist paper founded by Dorothy Day, under whom he worked.

One might say that all of this started for Robert, or at least was helped along, not when he read a book but when he copied one, one of the 43 volumes of the Pentagon Papers. One night in October 1969, just six weeks after the WRI conference--Robert was then 13--he was at work at the xerox machine in the advertising office of a friend of mine, while I was in the next room, collating what he was copying. His sister Mary, who was 10, was helping by cutting "Top Secret" off the tops and bottoms of the pages with a scissors.

I wanted them there with me for a couple of evenings that month not because I needed the help and certainly not because I wanted to implicate them. (I assumed they would not be held accountable, though in fact, after the Papers came out, a marshal came for Robert at 7:30 one morning and brought him to a grand jury to be questioned, without counsel, for over four hours: a first, to my lawyer's knowledge, in America. But a lot of precedents were being broken that month, as, against prior restraint of publication.)

In October '69, I thought the Pentagon Papers would be coming out, probably in Congressional hearings, within a month or so, and that Mary and Robert would never see me again except through bars or thick glass. They would read and hear a lot of bad things about me, that I was a traitor, or that I had gone crazy. They were too young for me to explain to them adequately what I was doing, or to understand the implications of the documents I was copying by reading them.

So I wanted them to have the memory, to have seen for themselves, that I hadn't lost my mind and I was acting in good conscience (I even wanted my children to help): that I was doing this calmly, deliberately, in a businesslike way (as we say in America), because I thought it was right to do for the good of our country.

And one other thing. I thought I could leave only one present to my children. (In those male chauvinist days, I think I thought of this, mistakenly, as a heritage mainly for my son). I wanted to give them, by matter-of-fact example, the lesson that there may be times when the best thing you can do is something that endangers your career or your closest relationships or your personal freedom, times when it is right to decide to go to prison.

That is a message you are likely to take seriously only from someone who has personally accepted a position of risk, and that is not a commonplace experience; you can easily go through your life without ever hearing it under those conditions. Most people do. So it is a gift (as well as a burden); it was Rosa Parks' gift to Martin Luther King, as I had read, in Stride Toward Freedom, after the Princeton conference.

I was feeling grateful to Bob Eaton and Randy Kehler for making me that gift just a few weeks earlier (the story below), and I wanted to pass it on to my children: the gift of awareness that this was something they might be called on to do themselves some day.

The next time I recall that my children and I all worked together like that was nine years later, when Robert took leave from the Catholic Worker to join me on the railroad tracks at Rocky

Flats, where we were obstructing the normal operations--constructing plutonium triggers for thermonuclear weapons--at the Nuclear Weapons Production Facility there.

On May 12, 1978, the morning after he arrived, Robert and I celebrated the first birthday of my youngest son Michael--who was back in San Francisco with his mother--with a party on the tracks, where we were arrested together with the other celebrants, mainly that day from Greenpeace. While we spent 16 days awaiting arraignment, Mary's college term ended and she came out to sit on the railroad tracks. It was the first time she had risked arrest; Robert had been in some tough jails by this time.

Ten years on, Mary had her 30th birthday last week--November 29, 1988--and she spoke to me by phone yesterday, an event permitted at random intervals by the French-built telephone system in Managua. She has worked in Nicaragua for eight years now, first as a volunteer in the literacy program, then in public health (among other things, training volunteer health brigadistas at clinics in the countryside, under threat of contra attack).

Robert, who will be 33 next week, is editor-in-chief of Orbis Books, the press of the Maryknoll Order, which is the principal publisher of liberation theology.

So the WRI conference and the weeks that followed put us all on a slippery slope; parents and children, beware.... Or to put it the right way, the gift was received: and has come back to me, many times, from my children.

And others have received it from them, including those in the courtroom when Robert was arraigned at Rocky Flats.

As we were driven away from our arrest in a police van, father and son handcuffed together, we drove alongside the tracks. Once or twice a week, a trainload of radioactive refuse had to be brought out along those tracks, in order for the plant to keep operating without poisoning itself. (My wife and young baby were back home in California, because the leading authority on radioactive health hazards had urged Patricia in the strongest terms not to be in the vicinity of the tracks, as a nursing mother, nor to let our baby near).

As it was, experts had told us--against a background of silence or denials from the government--workers at the plant suffered abnormally high rates of cancer, as did neighbors of the plant, in direct proportion to proximity. This to add weapons to a stockpile of over 25,000 nuclear warheads--the plant was just then gearing up to produce neutron warheads--that might someday be used to end most life on earth.

Looking out at the tracks, which he was seeing for the first time, Robert said: "You know, there should have been Germans on the tracks at Auschwitz."

He had time to think more about that--it was not the textbook answer in his Harvard course--in solitary over the next two weeks. He chose to follow the example of some activists he had been to jail with before and fast on water till he was arraigned. The jail authorities were put out by this, and in an effort to dissuade him, separated him from the rest of us and put him "under observation" in what was really a punishment cell, with lights on constantly, no bed, and a hole in the floor for a toilet.

It was sixteen days before I saw him again, in a chained column of handcuffed prisoners to be led to the courthouse for arraignment. He seemed to be having trouble standing; still I was not allowed to stand next to him or talk to him. Mary was in the courtroom; she began crying when she saw how weak her brother looked. He had passed out once some days before, we learned later, and he had to leave the courtroom at one point, dizzy and nauseated.

But he had written a statement the night before in his cell, and when it was his turn to speak--just prior to his sentencing, since he had not contested the charges--he read it to the court in a strong voice.

He began by describing the perspective of the Catholic Worker community of which he was part. He went on to say this:

By sitting on railroad tracks at Rocky Flats--one dozen, two dozen, even a hundred people--we ourselves may not actually be able to stop the production of plutonium triggers there. But we are trying to show that we as a people, if we wish and if we are determined, have that power--the power to change ourselves and history--we as a people can close Rocky Flats, and in fact that is what we must do.

We do not deny that the goal of worldwide disarmament is a complicated one and filled with risks, but it is time that we begin accepting the risks of peacemaking as we have for so long lived under the risks of war. Closing Rocky Flats would only be the beginning of our work. But we believe it is a logical beginning, and it is an absolutely necessary place to begin.

Perhaps I didn't need to come to Colorado to say this--to say that peace will come when we will translate our faith into action. I could have stayed home and written a letter to my congressman. I could have collected signatures on a petition. I could be saying

all this from the comfort and security of my own apartment.

Instead I am speaking to you now having spent 16 days as a guest in your county jail--nine days of that time in solitary confinement, which is a 6x6 foot concrete cage with no bed, chair, light, window, 1 toilet or sink. I speak to you after having fasted for 16 days. For 16 days I have eaten no food.

And I am grateful to the court for this. I am grateful to the court for allowing me the opportunity to dramatize in such a small way the life-and-death seriousness of the matter that brings us here today.

And now I face a possible year in jail. From what has happened this morning I suspect the court will not be so severe. Perhaps in the future the stakes will be higher for us. But it is a risk I am willing to face. This is not because I enjoy jail. I do not enjoy the possibility of being separated from my friends, my family and those I love, the possibility of being returned to my cage, in which I would not want to put any person. But I am prepared if this is what must be. Because we are living in a dark age, and many men and women will have to face greater risks than these if we are ever to see any light.

And I sincerely hope that for you, Judge, as for everyone in this courtroom, there is something, someone, some cause for which you would willingly face these risks. For that is what makes our lives precious and beautiful. Whether we give our lives for freedom, love, peace--or money, power and war--we have it to give only once.

For us, the choice is clear.

Rocky Flats is the Auschwitz of our time. Behind that barbed wire and those locked doors, intelligent, decent family men in their white suits and their security badges are implementing the technological preparations for the Final Solution to the Human Problem. In each bomb preparerd at Rocky Flats is another Holocaust--perhaps for the children of Moscow, Peking, Hanoi--those who build them don't know.

At one of the German concentration camps--I believe it was Dachau--the American troops who liberated it forced the townspeople to tour the camp--to see the huddled, emaciated survivors, the piles of corpses, the ovens that had disposed of the dead. And of course they

were numbed and shocked and they said, "We didn't know--we didn't know what was in those boxcars--we didn't know what came out of those chimneys."

We would like to spare the people of this county, this state and our country, that kind of experience--so we are shouting, we are trying to warn the people what kind of cargo goes over those railroad tracks in sealed boxcars and is killing and mutilating your unborn children by increasing levels of cancer, leukemia and genetic mutation--even if the bombs never go off.

And we are doing more than that. There are people right now who are blocking those tracks. There is a group of people--someday they will be thanked, now they are jailed--who are saying, "Build your bombs, continue your business as usual in this death camp--but I'm sorry that I must withdraw my consent--you will have to do it over our bodies."

They are saying, no longer should nuclear bombs be made in this country without Americans being arrested. And when I heard that in Colorado there were people who were willing to say this and act on it, I had to come here--because I knew these were people I wanted to know and to join and to be with.

I don't know what you will do with us--I know some face more serious charges. But I must say how very happy and proud I am at this moment. How proud I am to have had a small role in this action. And I thank you for listening so patiently and for helping make it possible for me to be here today in such beautiful company.

Thank you all."

As Robert said the last sentences, he turned around, away from the judge, to speak to the defendants who filled the small courtroom. We stood up, though a marshal was tugging urgently at my jail pajamas; the judge had warned us against demonstrations. We were all crying, had been for some time. We had our arms around each other; but when my oldest son ended we thanked him, and each other, with shouts and applause for a long time, and the judge cleared the courtroom.

(After ten more years of booming production, Rocky Flats is in the news this week. It has just this month been shut down, at last, for an indefinite period, because of radioactive health hazards that our expert witnesses described in detail when the rest of us were tried in November, 1978. Our organizing pamphlet then was titled, "Global Hazard, Local Risk," the latter referring to precisely the dangers to the workers and to the local communities, including Denver, that the government has finally acknowledged.

The community, though not the government or the determinedly-trusting workers, got the message back then; on the day our case went to the jury, the Rocky Mountain News editorialized: "Whatever you think of the actions of these protestors, what they are saying is right: Rocky Flats must go!" It hasn't gone, yet, but ten years later it has been closed indefinitely for clean-up, along with most of the other such plants.

The SANE-Freeze movement has just presented a demand to the US and Soviet governments for a mutual moratorium on warhead production (specifically, on tritium production, essential to maintain warheads as well as to produce new ones; the plant producing tritium is also now shut down for similar reasons of health hazard). The plants just might stay closed. It is unlikely that the US, under Bush, would accept this yet even if the Soviets did; but the issue is now on the agenda.